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MILORAD PAVIĆ

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BOOK ONE

A Little Night Novel



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BOOK ONE: A Little Night Novel

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1

They wore the tips of their mustaches braided like whips. For generations they had not smiled, and wrinkles recorded the years in the upper areas of their faces. They aged from their thoughts, not their joys. They knew the Jews called them Edomites; they called themselves salt. It takes a long time for a man to use up a handful of salt, they thought, and were patient. They bore two signs: the sign of the lamb and the sign of the fish. To the lamb they gave cakes made with tears, and to the fish, a ring made of dough, because the fish is the bride of the soul. A long time elapsed, four to five generations, before one of them said:

“I like the talking tree best; it alone bears a double fruit, and on it one can distinguish between quiet and silence. For a man with a heart full of silence and a man with a heart full of quiet cannot be alike...”

The one who had spoken came from Antioch, and he died without having clenched his teeth into the snarl of a beast, without fear or hatred, together with his fellow tribesman Ignatius, in Rome in the year 107 A.D. Just as in a grain of wheat one cannot see everything that is inscribed there, and inscribed are the kinds of spikes it will have, the size of the stubbles, and the number of new grains it will bring, so from

his sentence one could not read anything in advance, but it was all already inscribed there.

When a little sleep came upon them, it was a veritable salvation from the horror in which they were compelled to live. But even in their dreams they were assailed by terrors, by beasts with freckled lips and navels instead of eyes, and they, like a drowning man on dry land, struggled to reach wakefulness, although the waves of the dreams kept spinning them in a circle. Thus, tossed back and forth between two seas, driven from wakefulness to sleep and from sleep to wakefulness, their bodies were the only link between these two kinds of horror. They were the mail. And they did not know that both the dreams and the edicts of Septimius Severus, Maximus of Thrace, and Valerius were forcing them to seek shelter under the very same tree mentioned in that sentence. So as not to be nailed to a cross or a windmill, so as not to be thrown to wild beasts or have their heads smashed against the closing heavy dungeon doors, so as not to be compelled to feed the morays in the fountains with their own fingers, ears, and eyes, they fled to the desert.

They dispersed across the wilds of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, hid in graves, in pyramids, and in the ruins of onetime fortresses, wearing their long hair wrapped under their arms and tied across their chests to keep them warm at night. They went into the mountains of Upper Thebes, between the Nile and the Red Sea, where bird-eating dipnoan fish live; they spoke Coptic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Georgian, and Syrian, or kept silent in one of these languages, unceasingly and unconsciously moving toward the tree from that sentence, like the grain of wheat that begins to germinate. And then they came to Sinai. And they finally understood the meaning of the words:

“A man with a heart full of silence and a man with a heart full of quiet cannot be alike...”

As soon as that happened, as soon as the first hermit sat down in his own shadow and drank in the first dew, the fish and the lamb separated. Irrevocably and for all time at their disposal, they began to divide into two castes. Into those linked to the sun and those linked to tuater, into those with the lamb and those with the fish, into those with quiet and those with silence in their hearts...

There, in Sinai, the former joined in brotherhood and began to live a communal life, and they were called cenobites, solidarities, from the Greek koinos bios (communal life). The latter (those under the sign of the fish), were called idiorrhythmic, solitaries, because each had his own roof, his own way and rhythm of life, and, isolated from others, spent the days in total solitude, shallow but impenetrable solitude. These two castes, the solidarities and the solitaries, cast their shadows far into space and time. Because there is no clear borderline between the past, which grows and feeds on the present, and the future, which, it would seem, is neither inexhaustible nor incessant, so that in some places it is reduced or comes in spurts.

When they traveled, the solitaries always carried their own plates under their caps, a foreign tongue in their mouths, and sickles under their belts, because they set out on their journeys individually. The solidarities, on the other hand, always went in groups, carrying a kettle in turns, a common tongue between their teeth, and a knife under their belt. At first, however, they traveled through time more than through space. On that journey through time, those of the solitary life took with them the stone of silence, while those in the brotherhoods of communal life took the stone of quiet. These two stones were carried separately, and the quiet of the one was not heard in the silence of the others.

For idiorrhhythmics each keep their own silence, whereas cenobites foster a common quiet. The solitaries work silence like a field of wheat; they plow it, give it space, extend the furrow, water it so that it may flourish, so that it may grow tall, because with silence you can reach God, with your voice you cannot, no matter how hard you shout... The solidarities, in cultivating their quiet, do not direct it toward God but, rather, extend it like a dam toward the part of the world that does not belong to them and that has yet to be conquered; they surround and enclose themselves with quiet, and protect themselves with it or send it to catch their game like a hunting dog. And they know that there are good hunting dogs and bad...

“It’s all a great misfortune in which we feel like fish in water” thought the architect *manqué*, Atanas Svilar, sliding into his fortieth year as though into somebody else’s sweat.

He had studied at the School of Architecture in Belgrade from 1950 to 1956, which is when he learned that his upper lip was responsible for one thing and his lower lip for another: the upper was for hot, the lower for sour; he studied mathematics under Professor Radivoje Kašanin and wore a knitted cap with a whistle on top, attended Professor Marinković’s lectures on prestressed concrete, and at the same time learned to recognize women who preferred mustaches for dinner. He remained famous for his unusual final senior exam, which created an uproar and left the School divided into two camps. While still a student, he noticed that one of the striking virtues of great writers was their silence on certain important matters. And he applied this to his own profession: here the unused space, equivalent to the unsaid word in a work of literature, had its form, the emptiness had its shape and meaning, just as strikingly and effectively as space filled with buildings. The beauty of the emptiness gave him the inspiration for the beauty of the built part of the structure, and this was evident and reflected

in his designs. Preoccupied with the theory of sets, fluid mechanics, and especially the acoustics of closed spaces, he became and remained, in the opinion of those competent to judge, a brilliant expert. He was not a man to fool around with, and it was known that Svilar would carry fire in his mouth across the water, if necessary. His designs for the city's river belt, based on the premise that a river is always an older settlement than the town on its banks, attracted attention. The windows on his buildings always opened like loopholes, straight from the target to the eye rather than from the building to whatever was there outside, as is usually the case. He believed that humor in architecture was a bit like salt on bread, that there should be a door for every season of the year, a floor for the day and a floor for the night, because at night sound descends faster than it rises; he believed that when building the roof one should not only consider the sun, but also the moonlight, because the only good roof is one under which the egg does not rot. His hair was like straw, his sleep so swift and heavy it could shatter a glass. His left eye was aging faster than his right, and he had to don glasses to finish his project for a singles hotel and his draft of an art gallery, which was proclaimed the least costly design at a regional contest, but was never built. Svilar's projects simply did not sell. Rolled up in the closets of Svilar's apartment, or stuffed between double doors, they collected cobwebs for years.

"Buildings without shadows" Svilar's son called them.

"He measures and calculates here, and houses spring up over there, in the next world!" his peers would say, the hollows in their cheeks filling with darkness.

“If I had as many words as there are sheep in a pen, I’d understand it if nobody wanted me” Svilar joked “but this way, I don’t understand a thing!”

However, the devil had the last laugh. Despite his expertise, which was never disputed, despite his enormous working energy, which ruined his clothes and his hair, Atanas Svilar was simply unable to find a job in his field. And the drop of time cannot be wiped off the face with a sleeve, like a drop of rain. It stays there forever.

But nobody has tears in just one eye.

There was another noticeable thing about Svilar. Early on, as soon as he had developed a rough, broad, masculine mouth with which he could catch his own tear, he caught hay fever. From then on it attacked him every spring.

Besieged by hay fever every May, Svilar forgot the fragrance of flowers, but at night his sweat exuded such powerful smells of plants and flowers that they roused the house.

Married a long time, he had also spent two mature decades of his life without managing to earn a living from architecture. He did teach at a vocational school for building-constructors, but that was like talking about lunch instead of lunching. He continued to devote all his spare time to his drawings; indifferent to food and shy by day, at night he became so ravenous, eloquent, and hard-working that the back of his belt turned moldy. When his glasses got dirty, he would simply lick them and continue working. The years passed, he felt his saliva changing taste, he knew he was savoring some wines for the last time; he worked as though his ears were not planted on holes, but still he remained outside his profession and felt he was growing old in strokes, like a clock. Twice, at the ages of